Published: December 15, 2007
Last Updated: June 26, 2012

ITALY XIII. IRANIANS IN ITALY

ITALY

xiii. IRANIANS IN ITALY

It is difficult to speak about a true Persian community in Italy. The presence of Persians in Italy has always been fragmentary and discontinuous, which never led to any extended, cohesive social groups of permanent residents. Even during the periods when the migratory flow from Persia towards other countries was at its peak (India until the 18th century, France from the middle of the 18th century, Sweden and the USA, for different reasons, after World War II and especially following the Revolution of 1978-79), few Persians arrived in Italy. Unlike other countries, Italy has not been an especially favored destination for a long stay abroad or for exile, due to its fewer cultural and diplomatic links and the less developed legislation on immigration, work availability, and refugee asylum.

Recent research is now casting light upon the presence in Rome, in ancient times, of important personalities from the Persian court as well as members of the nobility, in particular during the Parthian and the early Sasanian eras. They included sometimes hostages or refugees staying for long periods of time as guests of the Roman imperial court and later on also newly converted Christian pilgrims (Nedergaard; Ricci 1996; Piemontese, 2001; idem, 2003). The

scant information available concerning Persian merchants and ambassadors who came to Italy (especially Rome and Venice) between the Middle Ages and the modern era does not reveal either a steady presence or lengthy stays. It seems that the first group of Persians to settle in Italy followed the arrival of the first Persian *chargé d'affaires*, Narimān Khan Qawām-al-Salṭana (1896) and then with the entourage of the minister plenipotentiary, Malkom Khan, in Rome (1899-1908), but about whom very little is known. The creation of a diplomatic seat gave a degree of continuity to a small-scale, but significant, Persian presence in Italy, which was represented by diplomatic staff and their families. The period of their residence in Italy, however, depended on the length of their assignment to their diplomatic posts, and, besides, they tended to isolate themselves from the Italian society in general, mainly residing within the areas around the embassy and the consulates. This has remained relatively constant even throughout crucial political and institutional changes. At present (2004), the Persian diplomatic corps, divided between Rome and Milan, consists of about forty individuals, including officers and clerical staff and their respective families. Since the mid-1980s, the Persian embassy to the Vatican has become a point of reference for the Shiʿites in Italy, and, as the European Islamic Cultural Centre, has published numerous religious works.

Historically, students have always constituted the main body of Persians residing in Italy. Fragmentary information indicates that since the 17th century, although still very sporadically, there has been the custom of spending spells in Italy to pursue artistic studies. Uncertain information indicates an educational voyage of a certain Moḥammad-Zamān to Rome in the first half of 1600. It is not clear whether he is the same Moḥammad-Zamān Farangiḵᵛān, who translated into Persian the *Idea del giardino del mondo* of Thomaso Tomai (see ITALY xii. TRANSLATIONS), or the famous painter living in India at the Mughal court (see Manucci 1901, II, pp. 16-18; Tucci 1949, pp. 79-80). Another known name is that of the intellectual and painter Mirzā Abu'l-Ḥasan Khan Saniʿ-al-Molk Ḡaffāri (q.v.), who spent five years (1846-50) in Italy studying at the *Accademia delle Belle Arti* in Rome and copying the works of Italian masters. In 1860, he became the editor of the first Persian newspaper, the *Ruz-nāma-ye waqā…yeʿ-e ettefāqiya*, published in Tehran (Davarpanah; Ḏokāʾ, pp. 18-19). Alongside these students of the arts (who remained very few until the 1950s), since 1927 another kind of Persian student could be found at the Naval Academy in Livorno, where Persian cadets received military and naval training (together with technical training in a variety of specializations up to university level), with the objective of creating

the Persian Royal Navy. The influx of students to the Academy was, however, interrupted by the advent of the Revolution of 1970. In any case, both of these projects were temporary, and, with a few rare and not statistically significant exceptions, most students returned home after completing their studies.

A greater flux of Persian students to Italy can be identified from the 1950s onwards. This new flux was soon helped by the creation of study grants established in accordance with the Cultural Agreement signed between the two countries in 1958. Exact figures are not available, but between 1950 and 1970 some tens of thousands of Persian students came to settle for varying periods of time in Rome, Florence, Turin, Venice, Perugia, and other major Italian cities, to study architecture, fine arts, music, engineering, medicine, and agronomy.

In Italy, as in the rest of Europe, among these students, who were mainly children of the wealthy classes from Tehran, opposition groups began to form against the politics of the shah. These groups were linked to the international network of the Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union. The activities of these student associations, such as the Federation of the Unions of Iranian Students in Italy, was never comparable to that of their equivalent groups in France, Great Britain or Germany, and in terms of publications, it never went much further than a few pamphlets.

During the same period, in particular during the late 1970s, Italy witnessed a boom in the importation of Persian carpets, with an increase in the number of Persian tradesmen coming to Italy. The trade in carpets and the vast network of shops and related activities (cleaning, repairs, etc.) has also represented the main working opportunity for the new generations of Persians in Italy during the twenty-five years following the Islamic Revolution.

With the advent of the Revolution of 1978-79, the majority of the last generation of students who had arrived during the monarchy regime decided to stay on in Italy, and many eventually started new lives there, mostly obtaining Italian citizenship (currently, approximately 5,000 Persians who were born in Persia have Italian citizenship). At times, these new residents have responded to the need to express their identity through cultural activities connected to their language and world (small publishing companies such as *Entešārāt-e Bābak*, which has been active for several years, the Persian bookshop, *Nimā*, active in Rome since 1994, several cultural associations, the longest standing of which is the *Associazione culturale Italia-Iran* in Florence,

magazines with a few issues, concerts, recording of traditional Persian music, etc.). Others have integrated into Italian environments and working situations, using the training they have acquired in cultural and technical fields such as medicine and engineering. On the whole, it is particularly noticeable that since the second half of the 20th century, a rather significant number of artists and intellectuals (writers, musicians, painters, sculptors, illustrators, photographers, actors) who completed their education in Italy settled there, assuming a productive role in their respective fields of expertise. This recent Persian contribution to Italian culture has yet to be duly recognized.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, as an aftermath of the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, a new migratory influx from Persia started to move towards Italy, although on a smaller scale compared to the same phenomenon towards other Western countries, especially the United States (see DIASPORA viii). According to information provided by the Ministry of the Interior (the only available data), the number of Persians in Italy rose from 10,131 in 1981 to 13,536 by 1986, who were fairly evenly spread throughout the country. Part of a sociological investigation carried out between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s on the Persian immigrants in Italy highlighted some of the characteristics of this migration. The immigrants came almost exclusively from the middle class of Tehran and displayed the features of first generation immigrants: young people (80% under 30 years of age), mainly male (71.1%), and mostly unmarried (58.3%). A common feature seems to be the temporary nature of their immigration. As already mentioned, Italy's legislation and employment situation do not make it an ideal country either for exile or for a long-term integration project. The pretext for coming to Italy has always been to study, though this is often neglected in favor of some form of temporary employment. Employment is still perceived as temporary even when it lasts over ten years, since the final and constant objective is to return to Persia as soon as the conditions permit.

The link with Persia is never broken and is often reinforced by economic ties with the family. A feature that characterizes Persian immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s is a sense of national identity common both to those who come from a religious background and culture and those who have arrived with secular or lay backgrounds and positions. The former, even when politically opposed to the authorities of their country, consider the return to the homeland as absolutely fundamental, whilst the latter seem to be more open to integration in the context of Italian society, even if in a state of continuous uncertainty. In

any case, partly due to this constant “utopia of returning home” and also due to the higher than average level of culture and social conscience, Persians in Italy do not consider themselves “immigrants” and tend not to lay down the foundations for the creation of a real Persian social network. Work—always present even if often temporary, especially for those who have arrived most recently (and particularly in the carpet sector, as already mentioned)—, personal relations within a limited range, and the distant but rooted link with their homeland have been main features of the Persian identity in Italy in the last two decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st.

Persians of the Bahai religion are an exception. Though overall a minority, they put their religious faith with its ecumenist characteristics before their national identity. They consider themselves citizens of the world and brothers of the Italians (or people of other nationalities) sharing the same religion. Consequently, they pursue social integration in the country where they are guests, supported by an efficient network of assistance from their own community, which in Italy is focused mainly in Rome and the surrounding area.

This context of the Persian presence in Italy, small-scale and fragmentary, is reflected in the low rate of political dynamism that can be seen. Despite the presence of almost all the opposition factions to the Islamic Republic, from Marxists to liberals, from monarchists to the Mojāhedin-e Ḵalq (probably the most active, with periodic demonstrations and radio broadcasts), as well as the supporters of the Tehran government, political debate has never turned into any particularly noteworthy activity, either in periodicals or in noteworthy occasional publications.

This framework, together with the most recently published figures from the Italian National Institute of Statistics, which indicate 8,371 Persian citizens (5,041 males and 3,330 females) legally present in Italy in 1999, confirm the notion that Persians in Italy, while representing a significant presence, especially due to their integration at certain professional and cultural levels, have not yet constituted a true “community.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Data has been used from the Italian Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Interior, from the Italian National Institute of Statistics, and from private archives. Stefano Allievi, "Sciiti d'Europa: Una minoranza senza visibilità," in Arnaldo Nesti, ed., *Laboratorio Iran: Cultura, religione, modernità in Iran*, Milan, 2003, pp. 113-26.

Changiz Davarpanah, "Il primo giornale a stampa iraniano e l'Italia (1853-56)," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 70, 1996, pp. 199-225.

Yaḥyā Ḏokāʾ, "Mirzā Abu'l-Ḥasan Ḵān Ṣaniʿ-al-Molk Ḡaffāri, moʾsses-e naḵostin honarestān-e naqqāši dar Irān," *Honar o mardom*, no. 10, 1963, pp. 14-27.

Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, tr. William Irvine as *Storia do Mogor or Mogul India 1653-1708*, 4 vols., London, 1907-1908; repr. Calcutta, 1965.

E. Nedergaard, "The Four Sons of Phraates IV in Rome," *Acta Hyperboraea* 1, 1987, pp. 102-15.

Angelo Michele Piemontese, "L'antica Persia veduta in Roma," in Laura Biancini et al., *Roma memoria e oblio*, Rome, 2001, pp. 71-81.

Idem, *La memoria romana dei santi martiri persiani Mario, Marta, Audiface e Abaco*, Rome, 2003.

Cecilia Ricci, "*Principes et Reges externi* (e loro schiavi e liberti) a Roma e in Italia: Testimonianze epigrafiche di età imperiale," in *Atti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Rendiconti. Classe di scienze morali*, S 9/7, 1996, pp. 561-92.

Chantal Saint-Blancat, "L'immigrazione iraniana in Italia: vera o falsa parentesi?" in Giovanni Cocchi, ed., *Stranieri in Italia: caratteri e tendenze dell'immigrazione dai paesi extracomunitari*, Bologna, 1989, pp. 109-25.

Idem, "La presenza iraniana in Italia," *Inchiesta*, no. 90, 1990, pp. 59-67.

Giuseppe Tucci, *Italia e Oriente*, Milan, 1949.

See also bibliographies above: i. CULTURAL RELATIONS WITH PERSIA; ii.

DIPLOMATIC AND COMMERCIAL RELATIONS WITH PERSIA.